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The Necessary Limitation of the Right of Private Judgment, on Controverted Points of Theology.

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A

SERMON

PREACHED AT THE

PRIMARY VISITATION

OF THE

RIGHT REV. CHARLES, LORD BISHOP OF NORWICH,

HOLDEN

AT STOWMARKET, ON WEDNESDAY, JUNE 6, 1794;

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BY CHARLES DAVY, M.B.

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BRITISH MUSEUM

TO

THE RIGHT REVEREND

CHARLES LORD BISHOP OF NORWICH,

THE FOLLOWING

S E R M O N

IS

(WITH HIS LORDSHIP'S PERMISSION)

MOST RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED

BY

HIS MOST OBEDIENT SERVANT,

&c. &c. &c.

THE PREACHER.

BRITISH MUSEUM

A

SERMON, &c.

ACTS viii. 30 & 31. Part of each.

AND PHILIP —— SAID, UNDERSTANDEST THOU WHAT THOU READEST?
AND HE SAID, HOW CAN I, EXCEPT SOME MAN SHOULD GUIDE ME?

TO allow an indefinite and unwarrantable extent to the opinions of the many, ſeems to be a ſtrong and prominent characteriſtic, of what is called the Philoſophy of the preſent times. We have ſeen them importunately invited to paſs authoritative Judgment, not on practical propoſitions perſpicuouſly ſtated, not on plain facts ſimply narrated, but on the moſt abſtract ſpeculations of the moſt abſtruſe and complex ſciences, Politics and Theology. Of what has been attempted, or what has been effected, by this wild and inſane reference in the firſt of thoſe inſtances, this is no proper place or occaſion to ſpeak; the application of it in theological matters is of eſpecial concern to us, and will not I hope be deemed an improper topic for our preſent conſideration.

In the Text we have an inſtance of a pious, well diſpoſed heathen, who ſeems to have taken ſerious pains in inveſtigating the moſt important queſtion which can come before the mind of man. He had arrived at conviction on the ſide of Revelation, embraced the worſhip of the One true God, The Holy One of Iſrael, and became a proſelyte to Judaiſm.

The Ethiopian was a man of no mean note, and it is fair to ſuppoſe that he was as much exalted above the unlettered vulgar in the cultivation of his mind as in civil rank; yet we find, he did not venture to truſt himſelf further than to decide on the general merits of the queſtion; when he came to a controverted point, his judgment was ſuſpended, and he did not dare to draw a concluſion, from premiſes which he did not diſtinctly comprehend. In common with all the members of his adopted Religion, he indulged the glorious hope of a Saviour; when he came to Jeruſalem, he found that auguſt character aſſumed by one who had maintained his claim to it, by many wondrous works, and by many appeals to ancient prophecies; but notwithſtanding the ſtrength of this ſupport, he found that the claim was not univerſally allowed; that "ſome believed and ſome believed not." He read the Scriptures indeed, and he found abundant reference to that great event, but feeling himſelf unable to unravel the intricacies, to clear the obſcurities, to ſolve the dificulties he met with, and above all to arbitrate between contending opinions, he wiſely

wiſely ſtopped when he could proceed no further on ſafe grounds; he was willing to reſign the taſk of explanation, to thoſe who were qualified for it, by the labour of ſtudy directed to that end; or as in this particular caſe, by the miraculous communication of ſupernatural intelligence.

WELL had it fared with Chriſtianity, if all men in all ages of it, had reaſonedwith the ſame candour, good ſenſe and ſimplicity which are conſpicuous in this early convert! Had the ſame mind been in all, which was in him, how many hereſies muſt have died in their birth, which have grown up and waxed ſtrong, and ſadly obſtructed the progreſs of true Chriſtianity! Alas! now that from an infinity of cauſes the difficulty of judging is incalculably increaſed, an unlimited invitation to form a judgment is thrown out, not to perſons of cultivated and enlarged minds, not even to the decently educated, but to the very poor unlettered multitude. And to form a judgment on what? not on the general truth of Chriſtianity, not on the purity of its practical rules, which common ſenſe muſt inſtantaneouſly approve, but on doctrinal points of the moſt abſtruſe nature, which baffle "the wiſdom of the wiſe" and ſet at nought "the underſtanding of the prudent."

YES—this new and ſtrange thing hath happened—this prepoſterous reference hath been made. Thoſe men amongſt us, who have diſtinguiſhed themſelves by philoſophizing upon Chriſtianity, by

by profeſſing to clear and ſimplify and diveſt it of Myſtery, to reduce it to few and eaſy Principles, have been officious advocates for the Univerſal Right of Private Judgment. They have declaimed in favour of it, as loudly and as pertinaciouſly, as if it had been denied. It has not been denied; but by that Church from whoſe errors and abominations we were liberated many ages ago, and whoſe unauthorized claim to Infallibility, we deride.

God forbid that it ſhould be denied! ſurely no ſincere Chriſtian of a Reformed Church will refuſe to another, what he claims to himſelf as a ſacred and unalienable Right, nor forbid his Brother to exerciſe thoſe Faculties, for the exertion of which, he is accountable to God, and not to man. All that is contended for, (and it is to be contended for ſtrenuouſly) is that the right be limited and defined, as ſound reaſon and common ſenſe require. In God's name let every man think for himſelf, but let it be only juſt ſo far as he has learned to think; let every man judge, but let him firſt ſcrupulouſly and conſcientiouſly inquire, how far his qualifications will enable him to judge. Till he hath qualified himſelf, let him modeſtly and ſenſibly forbear. In the mean time he may do well to compenſate his own deficiency by the lights he may borrow from the better informed. He may in due progreſs of improvement, become wiſer than his teachers, but till he is, let him not pretend to be ſo.

ALL whoſe faculties are in a ſtate of progreſſive improvement, muſt unavoidably admit many things, which they do not diſtinctly underſtand; we are neceſſarily determined to pay this deference to authority every day; we are ſure that if we did not, the buſineſs of the world would be at a ſtand; we know that without it, no man can qualify himſelf, for even the humbleſt department in life. And when Religion becomes the ſubject of judgment are men unwilling to admit the ſame principle? ſo then, before any ſkill can be pretended in the ſimpleſt Science, and in the meaneſt Art, the elements muſt be learned, and progreſs made by gradual approach, and ſucceſſive improvement, while all the intricacies of Polemical Theology, are to be diſentangled by the unaſſiſted operation of intuitive ſagacity! Would any man venture to exhort his neighbour to truſt thus to himſelf in the ſciences of Medicine or Juriſprudence? Whoſoever did ſo, would be reputed inſane, and his advice aſſuredly would not be followed. So emphatically true is it that "the children of this world are wiſer in their generation than the children of light." Life and Property are too valuable to be put upon ſuch a deſperate riſque; the ſtronger emotion would abſorb the weaker; the conſideration of ſelf-preſervation or of ſelf-intereſt would overpower and annihilate ſelf-conceit, and the vanity of diſplaying ſkill.

So enormouſly abſurd is this prepoſterous appeal, that were no proofs of it at hand, it might paſs for a mere dream, for ſomething

imaginary not really exiſting. But "I am not fighting as one who beateth the air"—whoſoever has read what has been for ſeveral late years, and ſtill continues to be offered to the public, on one ſide of a much agitated queſtion, will not need to be told that on that queſtion, an appeal is made to the people. But as that term is vague, and muſt comprehend perſons of very great diverſity of intellectual endowments, it may be doubted whether the mere vulgar are meant to be included in it. That they are not only included, but eſpecially addreſſed, is demonſtrable from the *form* and *manner* in which the appeal is conveyed. In thoſe commodious manuals of epitomized polemics, the people are roundly and unreſervedly aſſured that all are qualified to be Judges of this complicated and multifarious Controverſy, becauſe the language of Scripture is popular not ſcientific, and becauſe nothing more is neceſſary to enable men to judge, than plain good Senſe and freedom from Prejudice. Let us beſtow a ſhort attention on theſe reaſons:—

I. The people are informed that the language of Scripture is popular. The propoſition expreſſed thus in general terms, can not be either aſſented to, or denied—can not properly be ſaid, either to be true or falſe. It muſt firſt by proper limitations, be brought into a debatable ſtate.—If it is intended to comprehend the whole of Scripture, it is obvious to remark, that

1ſt. Much of the language of the Old Teſtament is hiſtorical, ſuppoſing

ſuppoſing the facts to be generally told in plain language, yet they are in a great meaſure facts of a very extraordinary nature, and the narrative therefore can not be of very familiar comprehenſion to the mere vulgar.

2dly. Much of it is poetical; wonderfully ſublime and majeſtic; ſoaring magnificently above the language of common life; higher than any other poetry in the world.

3dly. Much of it is prophetical; in its nature, extremely obſcure and wanting all the elucidation which can be procured.

4thly. Even the moral books of the Old Teſtament, though containing rules for the conduct of life, are above the level of the vulgar. The great and wiſe author of the moſt conſiderable part of this diviſion of the Old Teſtament, ſpeaks of a proverb and the interpretation thereof, not as a thing of an eaſy and common ſort, but as a kind of literary accompliſhment, the fruit of ſtudy and inſtruction.

THESE deductions being made, little of the Old Teſtament remains which can be called popular language; ſo little, that one would be tempted to think, it was not meant to be included in the obſervation.

AND if the propoſition be aſſerted of the New Teſtament *excluſively* here too, a further limitation muſt be made, (not to ſpeak of the Revelation of St. John) who will deny that in the writings of St. Paul

Paul there is much language properly ſcientific — much abſtract reaſoning? after this further deduction, what remains will indiſputably be popular language.

HAVING thus reduced the general propoſition (which if we would reaſon ſimply and fairly muſt be ſo reduced) we may come to iſſue upon this point.

IT doubtleſs was the ordinary language of thoſe perſons who firſt received the New Teſtament from the hands of its Authors; for whoſe uſe it was originally deſigned; by whom it was therefore familiarly underſtood. Of thoſe who receive it through the medium of a Tranſlation, it it not the ordinary language, and by them therefore is not familiarly underſtood.

No deep inſight into the theory of language is required to ſhew that that of common life is full of imagery and metaphor; not indeed of formal figures, but of words of *transferred* meaning, from objects of ſenſe; that it muſt neceſſarily abound in alluſions to an infinity of local particulars; alluſions, not fully and directly pointed, but obliquely and remotely glancing, ſlightly touching on one point only, and in a ſingle word. Now theſe Reſemblances, and Alluſions, and Aſſociations, cannot without very great difficulty (in ſome inſtances can not poſſibly) be adequately tranſlated; and when tranſlated, will not be familiar to plain untutored men, for want

want of that acquaintance with Archetypes, which was what rendered it originally intelligible. They may be told that it is popular language, but they feel that it is not ſo to them; that it is not their own. They have another founded on a totally different ſet of Archetypes. Let men then inſiſt as much as they will on the ſimplicity of popular language, let them aſſert that of the New Teſtament to be as eaſy and intelligible as they would have it to be, to thoſe who firſt received it, to whom the language was vernacular; on that very account it muſt frequently need an Interpreter to them who read it now; becauſe it is tranſlated, becauſe it is ſubmitted to people of a different Age and Nation, of Manners, Sentiments, Habits, Cuſtoms and Prejudices, infinitely remote and diſſimilar.

It follows as an undeniable conſequence that truths conveyed in ſuch language, will be liable to great miſconſtruction. What we ſhould reaſonably expect to find moſt plain, moral rules cannot be allowed unreſervedly to be ſo, we find indeed that when our Saviour delivered thoſe leſſons, they were not unfrequently ſtrangely miſunderſtood by his hearers. Why ſhould they be univerſally and clearly underſtood now? Inſtances might eaſily be produced of moral leſſons in the Goſpel very likely to be grievouſly miſinterpreted by thoſe who are not habituated to the reception of inſtruction in the oriental manner by Parable and Apologue, of which the application is left to themſelves.

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But ſhould we even concede this point, we do not grant ſo much as is demanded: we muſt allow the many to be authoritative judges of Doctrines, of Deductions made from paſſages of diſputed ſenſe, and diſputed by whom? by the wiſeſt and moſt learned of all ages. Their judgments differ, and the determination between them is to be pronounced by thoſe, who, muſt be unable to form any judgment at all!

II. That plain good Senſe and freedom from Prejudice are all that is neceſſary to enable a man to form his judgment, is another reaſon given for this appeal to the people. It follows from what has been already ſaid that a very great deal more than plain good ſenſe muſt be neceſſary, that every thing muſt be neceſſary which can lead us into the circumſtances upon which the ordinary language of a diſtant age and nation was formed—every thing which can lead us to underſtand thoſe diſtant and indiſtinct alluſions to things no longer in exiſtence, on the accurate interpretation of which the whole ſtreſs of the moſt important words and phraſes may depend. A very formidable liſt might be given of the ſeveral branches of profound ſtudy neceſſary to this end. Knowledge to which the moſt learned can but imperfectly attain, which is totally out of the reach of the vulgar.

As to freedom from prejudice, it is doubtleſs the grand thing to be deſired in the purſuit of all truth, but he who expects to find

find it in the loweſt orders of the people, can ſurely have made but little obſervation on the ſtate and nature of knowledge amongſt them. What are the greater part at leaſt of the notions they poſſeſs but prejudice? Who can ſuppoſe that he who labours from dawn to dark at the loom, or in the furrow, whoſe daily bread depends upon his daily toil, can find time to compare and diſcriminate, and combine his notions, to diſcipline and chaſtiſe his mind ſo as to keep it fairly open to the reception of whatſoever truth may be preſented to it? who can ſuppoſe that ſuch a man can have even any idea of ſuch a proceſs? exemption from prejudice is certainly not to be looked for amongſt thoſe who can take only narrow views of a few particulars, but in thoſe who can take a general and diverſified ſurvey of things. Perfect freedom from it, is a thing to be wiſhed for rather than expected; if found at all, it muſt be the reſult of great Strength, and great Inclination and peculiarly happy Diſpoſitions of Mind.

WHAT then! it may be ſaid — is it meant to encourage the people to reſign their faculties into the hands of their teachers and pay implicit obedience to whatever they may think fit to deliver to them? no farther than it is *neceſſary* that they pay ſuch deference to *ſomebody*. Dominion over their faith, we pretend not to claim, if any ſuch general uſurpation were intended it would certainly be impracticable. If our opponents will bring railing accuſations againſt us, we are doubtleſs obliged to them for making them ſuch

as

as to refute themſelves. No ſet of men, ſuppoſe them as crafty and as worldly-minded as you pleaſe, not all the art of all the moſt conſummate impoſtors the world ever ſaw in all ages of it, collected and concentrated together, could now effect a ſyſtem of religious impoſition. It once was practicable, but that was when all the miſerable ſcanty learning of the times was confined to the Sacerdotal Order, and all ranks of the Laity from the higheſt to the loweſt, were univerſally, equally and deplorably ignorant.

THE great improvements in all kinds of knowledge, and the general diffuſion of it which has ſince taken place, ſecure the world from all apprehenſions on this head. It is very certain that theſe are not times favourable to the pretenſion (if any ſuch exiſted) of prieſtly fraud and tyranny over the Conſciences of men, moſt ſincerely, and emphatically, and I truſt in the liberal and true ſpirit of Chriſtianity do I thank my God that they are not, but aſſuredly they are times which very preſſingly require that accurate diſtinction to be made, between true Philoſophy and bold Empiriciſm, between ſhallow glozing Sophiſtry and ſound logical Argumentation.

THE Scriptures are in the hands of the People, God be thanked—what reformed Chriſtian does not look back with the moſt animate glow of Gratitude to thoſe venerable and truly apoſtolic men who laboured and who bled in that glorious cauſe, in procuring

curing that ineſtimable benefit. The Scriptures are in the hands of the people. Let every one read them—let every one endeavour to comprehend what he can, the extent of comprehenſion will doubtleſs vary in various inſtances; here as in other caſes, the old maxim will hold good, ſcriptural knowledge will be received in proportion to the recipient. Every one will get enough to "fill him with all joy and peace in believing that he may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Ghoſt."

And if he does not get enough to give him clear inſight into the merit of controverted points, there is no need for him to regret the want.—The Religion of a plain untutored man is, as it ought to be, a warm vigorous ſentiment dwelling in his heart, ſpringing forth and actuating his Conduct; to ſuppoſe that it is in a dry cold ſpeculative belief, laid up in his underſtanding, to be turned and twiſted any way by a ſuperficial view of arguments is abſurd; to endeavour to make it ſo is dreadfully dangerous. We now behold in the world the effects of turning the people away from practical rules of life into the wild mazes of Speculation; effects which cannot be thought on without a keen and penetrating ſenſe of horror—effects too notorious to need being particularized here.

In a word Theology, like other ſciences is improvable;—like them it has been very greatly improved. To deny that further improvements may yet be made in any human Inſtitution

or human ſcience, or aſſert that men are to ſtand ſtill in their purſuit after Knowledge or Happineſs, would be little leſs abſurd than the appeal againſt which I have been contending; but what is, or what is not an improvement in the knowledge of this ſcience, who are to judge? the learned or the ignorant? In Bodies of Doctrines, as in Bodies of Civil Laws, what is to be allowed to ſleep or grow obſolete, and what to be formally repealed, muſt in all reaſon be determined by the judgment of thoſe who are to interpret and to execute them, rather than by thoſe who have ſubmitted to be governed by them for their good. Some men, whoſe claim to the title of Philoſophers I mean not to diſpute, but who are not good reaſoners enough to diſtinguiſh between the ideal perfection which ſhould be finally aimed at, and the point which men may be likely at any time actually to reach, have declaimed againſt all ſuch bodies of doctrines. Facts however ſeem ſtrongly to lead us into the belief that if we would keep Chriſtianity alive in the world, we muſt maintain them in ſome form or other, till ſome great amelioration of human nature takes place; ſo long as the world continues to produce "men of like paſſions with us," intereſted and ſiniſter motives may be imputed, but it is eaſier to throw out ſuch aſſertions in the form of general calumny than to ſubſtantiate the charge in ſpecific inſtances: even ſuppoſe it done, the arguments retain their intrinſic validity however blameable be the motive on which they are brought forth. In ſhort whenever any thing is agreed upon as an improvement by the general (I do

not

not ſay *univerſal)* concurrence of the learned and enlightened, it may then regularly be inculcated under their authority. There does not ſeem to be any other way of proceeding ſafely. Whether ſuch a thing would under all the moſt favourable circumſtances be received by the people without reſiſtance, is another queſtion, and a matter of very doubtful diſputation.

MAY every real improvement, every thing for the benefit and furtherance of true Chriſtianity advance in oppoſition to the prejudices and intereſts of Men, but as human means muſt be employed, let the moſt mature and enlightened human wiſdom be inſtrumental in introducing them: may the whole Catholic Church of Chriſt "grow in grace" and be "more and more enriched in all utterance and in all knowledge, abound in every good word and work" may all the corruptions and depravations of the glorious Goſpel of Chriſt Jeſus, whatſoever they may be, be purified and done away, may all things work together for good—may we uniformly "go on unto perfection" to which we are tending—till it come to paſs that "they ſhall teach no more every man his neighbour and every man his brother, ſaying know the Lord, for they ſhall all know him from the leaſt to the greateſt" till at our Saviour's final coming, there be preſented to him "a glorious Church having neither ſpot nor wrinkle nor any ſuch thing."

FINIS.